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The Game at the Green Chapel: A Game-Oriented Perspective on Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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Recommended Citation

Maldonado, Joshua David, "The Game at the Green Chapel: A Game-Oriented Perspective on Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 122.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2020/122

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The Game at the Green Chapel:

A Game-Oriented Perspective on Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight



For both of my grandparents, thanks to whom I exist as the person I am.

This project would also not be possible without...

My academic advisor, Maria Sachiko Cecire, who stuck with me through thick and thin. Your expectations for me, paired with your infinite patience, are what kept me going on this project.

My senior project colloquium professor, Marisa Libbon, whose vast knowledge of and passion for Middle English literature inspired me to take an interest in it. Thank you for having faith in me in the times I had very little.

My countless friends, who I have systematically regaled with the tale of Sir Gawain. For the hundreds of hours of study sessions, and the hundreds of hours of emotional support, thank you. You know who you are.

You, the reader, who fate has somehow brought to this page. You are the reason this exists.

Introduction - The Game Good Knights Once Played

It is the day of the new year in Camelot. The good King Arthur, his wife Guinevere, and the Knights of the Round Table were merry with games and celebration. The warmth of this festivity was briefly and abruptly interrupted when a titanic, unknown figure, clad completely in green, canters up to the court. His horse is green to match, and so is the mammoth axe he wields in his hand. His other hand grasps a holly branch, as a symbol of peaceful intentions.

King Arthur asks this hulking Green Knight to speak of his intentions. After a bout of ominous silence, the figure speaks. He is not here to harm anyone. He is simply here to challenge someone to a *game*. Though Arthur is poised to accept this challenge, Sir Gawain of the knights speaks up. “Wolde 3e, worpilych lorde... I haue frayned hit at yow fyrst, foldez hit to me”¹ (350-358). Gawain proclaims himself as among the weakest of the knights, showing a performative modesty and asking to accept the Green Knight’s game for his own self-improvement.

Arthur grants Gawain’s wish, and the Green Knight accepts his challenger. The game, known as the *beheading game* henceforth, is simple: today, one will strike the other with the Green Knight’s axe. A year and a day later, the other shall return a blow. This exchange of blows is a simple game at a glance, but the Green Knight is actually putting into motion a one-year-long plan to test Gawain’s honor and integrity.

¹ If you [Arthur] would graciously grant it... I request that this task [the Green Knight’s offer] be transferred to me.

This is the stage that is set in the early pages of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a chivalric poem written in the late 14th century. Penned by an unknown author, it is one of the best-known Arthurian legends and is often studied today. The narrative follows Sir Gawain, a knight of Arthur's round table, as he agrees to and participates in the beheading game offered by the mysterious Green Knight.

An Arthurian legend, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is primarily concerned with honor and knighthood. In addition, however, the poem has an undeniable preoccupation with games. From the initial "beheading game" offered by the Green Knight, to the "exchanges game" later offered by Bertilak, another identity of the Green Knight, to the very concept of knighthood itself, there always exists an air of challenge, sport, and determination to follow through as a good knight and player of games.

This project aims to look at *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a text that uses games as a plot device to explore and explain the concepts of X and Y. Said project will assert that games themselves function as a unique and effective literary device that can inform what it means to be the perfect knight in the world of chivalric literature.

The first chapter of this work focuses on pointing out multiple ways in which games and play seep through the context of the story. A recurring theme in the poem, for example, is the notion of self-contradiction -- something that, in itself, contains two conflicting traits that logically would not be able to coexist. [Give a quick example of how this appears in SGKK that you address in Chapter 1] The second chapter sets its sights on the idea of perfect knighthood and whether such a thing exists. This problem, one that *Sir Gawain* and greater Arthurian legends are concerned with, is tackled by

comparisons to what it may mean to be a perfect player of games. The conclusion of this work will serve to offer additional avenues for research regarding games as literary devices, as well as an assessment of Arthurian literary importance in the era of modernity.

The rest of this introduction is dedicated to explaining important plot points to my thesis. In brief, I will propose what I mean by “game.” Then I will offer short descriptions of key game-related elements in the poem: the beheading game, the exchanges game, the meeting at the Green Chapel, and Gawain’s penance.

As this project will be about games and play, a formal definition of “game” is required going forward. There are many valid, working meanings of this idea, from *video games* to *mind games*. However, the definition that will be used henceforth will be that presented by philosopher and game theorist Bernard Suits:

To play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity (Suits, 10).

Following these rules, a game can simply be defined as (1) an activity with a goal in mind, (2) in which the goal must be brought about while following specific rules, (3) in which the limitations of the rules define the way in which the goal is reached.

Using the above definition, the Green Knight’s beheading challenge can inarguably be defined as a game. The goal is to deal one blow to each other each. The

specific rules are that the blows must be a year apart. And, most importantly, that one year serves as a device for Gawain to think about the decisions he is making. Suits' definition of what a game is will also be helpful going forward, as there are other games present in Gawain's tale that also fall under this description. The exchanges game, for example, is one in which the honest knight must trade his winnings each day for someone else's. Games like this are present throughout the poem, and I will define them as such based on these premises.

The beheading game is what the story revolves around. It gives Gawain a motivator not only to stand up and become part of the story, but as a game, also provides a mission with a clear goal: reach the Green Chapel at the designated time and accept a blow in turn from the Green Knight. Meanwhile the exchanges game, which takes place about halfway through the narrative, is another game that Gawain accepts and participates in. On his journey to complete the beheading game, he stumbles upon a grand stronghold in the woods headed by Bertilak, a dignified lord and hunter. Bertilak, as a kindly gesture, offers Gawain to stay at his home until the time comes for him to face the Green Knight. The lord offers a game of his own: every day, Bertilak will go out hunting. Gawain will stay within the walls of Bertilak's estate during this time. At the end of each day, Gawain and Bertilak will exchange what they had gained that day with one another. Gawain is often given the game that Bertilak hunts, and Bertilak receives from Gawain kisses from Bertilak's wife that Gawain received within the confines of the castle.

Gawain's meeting at the Green Chapel serve as the climactic end to the tale, where Gawain completes the beheading game after a long year. The end of the game is met by a memorable encounter with Bertilak, the Green Knight. Having shown honor and integrity by following through on his promises and arriving on time to accept an axe strike, the Green Knight praises Gawain, and punishes him for wavering only with a nick on the neck. Beyond Bertilak's punishment, however, Sir Gawain decides to undergo further penance for his cheating. Gawain wraps a green girdle, the very object that proves his cheating, around his arm as a reminder for not doing as well as he could have, and wears it for the rest of the story and implicitly beyond. This penance is a reflection of Gawain's guilt and drive to improve as a knight and player of games.

The rest of this project delves into the many ways in which games, and the playing of games, help to explain concepts of chivalry and knighthood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Chapter 1 - The Axe and the Holly Branch

Now that my introduction has set the stage, I would like to be able to discuss *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in a more concentrated way. This chapter will address the self-contradictory nature of games in the poem. This chapter will also raise questions about deceit and duality, ending with an analysis of the games in *Sir Gawain* in this context. I will begin by addressing what I mean by “self-contradictory,” and I will continue to describe some examples of this in the text. These examples will range from characters being self-contradictory to the very environment of the poem itself being so.

Self-contradiction, which is a key term in this chapter and beyond, refers to a person, thing, event, or any one subject that seems to possess two conflicting traits at once. I argue that the very world of this poem is one that is full of self-contradictory characters, objects, goals, and environments. Questions involving self-contradiction raise themselves naturally throughout the story, almost begging to be explored. How can a game be so serious yet so playful? The many games present within the text are presented as jovial challenges and friendly contests, but also as fierce, life-altering or even life-ending tasks that serve to judge one’s character. How can the kind Bertilak and the life-threatening Green Knight be the same person? At one moment, a hulking figure threatens the life of one of King Arthur’s knights. The very next moment, the same person is inviting that same knight to a joyous feast as a friend. How can Gawain be the perfect knight as well as a fearful, regretful cheater? Sir Gawain’s perfectly adorned attire, along with the Green Knight’s own implication that Gawain is a “faultless prince,”

throws him in with the best. But Gawain himself disagrees with this, taking from his quest a token of shame and dishonor. How can Bertilak's wife strive both for Gawain's love and Gawain's death? While trying to seduce Gawain, she knows that her success would cause his death. How can a girdle be both an all-powerful item and a worthless rag? The green girdle Lady Bertilak gives Gawain is perceived as valuable enough to breach his honor for, but is also a less-than-worthless sign of failure. How can a game be both won and lost? Bertilak considers Gawain to have played the beheading game honorably, but Gawain considers himself a cheater to be disqualified. These and more are examples of self-contradiction within the poem.

First and foremost in the field of self-contradiction, Gawain himself both wins and loses the beheading game. To conclude this game with the gift of a memento, Bertilak the Green Knight entrusts Sir Gawain with the green girdle that was stolen. "Þis a pure token," he says, "Of þe chaunce of þe Grene Chapel at cheualrous knyȝtez"² (SGGK 2397-2398). Gawain accepts this gift, which he goes on to wear at all times as a reminder of his own failure. Indeed, the girdle *is* a sign of failure. It is unequivocal proof that Gawain cheated in the hunting game, a mini-game crafted by Bertilak as part of the grander beheading game. If the girdle is a sign of Gawain's having cheated, why does the Green Knight call it pure? Why does Bertilak call Gawain "the most faultless of princes to ever walk on foot"? The girdle's self-contradiction is evident, as it is both something pure and representative of wrongdoing. This dual nature carries through to the end result of the beheading game: though Gawain does not forgive himself for

² This pure sign will stand for the game at the Green Chapel good knights once played.

cheating, Bertilak readily and enthusiastically does. Gawain sees a game lost, and Bertilak sees a game admirably played. This is because Bertilak minds the attitude and intent *behind* the cheating, while Gawain does not. This difference in perspective is the difference between whether Gawain ultimately wins or loses the game. This same difference in perspective is also the agent that creates a situation that is two things at once: a win and a loss.

Indeed, Bertilak plainly states his reasons for forgiveness: “Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted; / Bot þat watz for no wylyde weke, ne wowyng nauper / Bot for 3e lufed your lyf-- þe lasse I yow blame”³ (315). Bertilak recognizes that Sir Gawain only kept the girdle from him because he was afraid for his life. He did not conceal the girdle because he liked it, or because he wanted it, or because he coveted Bertilak’s wife. It was only because he believed that the girdle may have been able to protect him from a gruesome fate. It is reasonable that anyone else would have stolen the girdle for courtship or covetousness, because Bertilak’s wife is described as very objectively desirable: “He sez hir so glorious and gayly atyred, / So faultles of hir fetured and of so fyne hewes, / Wi3t wallande joye warmed his hert”⁴ (SGGK 1759-1761). Because of Gawain’s more reasonable and understandable desire to survive the beheading game, Bertilak forgives Gawain.

Gawain treats himself with much less dignity. Rather than consider *why* he cheated, like the Green Knight does, he only considers *that* he cheated. He does not

³ You lapsed just a little; your loyalty flagged. / Since the cause was not courtship or covetousness, / But the love of your life, so much less do I blame.

⁴ When he gleaned her so gaily, so gloriously fine, / For her features were faultless and fair was her skin, / A gladness then grew in him, glowed in his heart.

accept Bertilak's forgiveness, choosing to repent on his own by eternally wearing the girdle as a grim reminder of his own dishonesty. This difference in perspective, as I have previously mentioned, is the difference between a win and a loss for Gawain in the beheading game. And this difference is also precisely why Gawain both wins and loses: he is stuck not in between, but on two opposite ends of a spectrum. Bertilak, the orchestrator, the gamemaster, the one to claim ultimate judgement on Gawain's life, believes that Gawain won the game. Gawain showed true honor in the way he played, even though he broke the rules. Gawain, both the player and the one being played, the recipient of the prize of being allowed to live, cannot accept that award without intense guilt at having cheated. Gawain's guilt upon the belief of losing the game is further magnified when it is abruptly brought to light by the very judge of the game.

In asking the question "did Gawain win the game?" the question that is implicitly asked is one of perspective. Whose perspective is more valid: the gamemaster's, or the player's? It depends on where victory lies. If victory lies in an award, a trophy, a congratulatory speech, then Gawain won the game. If victory lies in emotion, confidence in one's play style, and personal belief and gratification, then Gawain has clearly lost. I assert that Gawain has both won and lost the beheading game, a truly self-contradictory feat. As the player of someone else's game, one cannot declare themselves the winner. Likewise, one cannot declare themselves the loser, as Gawain would like to. But as a gamemaster, to declare a player's loss or victory based on a personal whim, forgiveness in Bertilak's case, can also be viewed as folly.

This brings me to a troubling conclusion. In most games, the winner should be determined by the rules of the game and the conditions of victory being met within legality. There is no dispute as to who wins dice, checkers, cards and the like, unless there is cheating involved. But the beheading game has no clear rules or victory conditions beyond “find Bertilak to receive a blow at the Green Chapel in a year’s time.” No rules were explicitly stated outside of that, and thus, anything would be legal. Gawain fulfilled these conditions, and thus technically “won” the game. Once Gawain was tempted to give the Green Knight a visit earlier than promised, which would have broken the rules, but Bertilak convinced him against it.

The game Gawain technically cheated at was the exchanges game, not the beheading game. To bring it back into focus, the rules of this game were that Bertilak would go out hunting each day, and Gawain would stay at home and get what he could. At the end of the day, they would exchange every one of their spoils with each other. Gawain gained the spoils of a girdle during that game, and he hid it from the one he was playing with. That unequivocally counts as cheating. And, since the exchanges game is a game within the beheading game, then Gawain cheated at the beheading game.

But that logic can be seen as folly. Gawain could not have known that the exchanges game was a part of the beheading game. Is cheating really cheating if one does not know they are playing the game? This and many other questions arise from the beheading game, none of Gawain’s own fault. But they can be explained with self-contradiction: Gawain both cheated and did not cheat. The poet does a good job of making the reader question the morality of this-- not grey, but black *and* white. This is

the duality of self-contradiction. In the end, Gawain both won and lost the game. This is an intriguing self-contradiction stemming directly from the concept of games: one's viewpoint could conflict with another's, while both can end up being true at the same time. This further propagates the idea of self-contradiction in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, providing evidence that it is a preoccupation of both games and the tale itself.

It is worth mentioning that there is another player who bends the rules of the beheading game. Unlike Gawain, this person does not feel any remorse for things like deceit and trickery. The character I refer to is Bertilak, the Green Knight himself. In the initial challenge in Arthur's court, he tricks Gawain into a one-year death contract by choosing not to reveal the fact that he can lift his own severed head off the ground and live. He disguises his own identity and feigns ignorance about Gawain and his quest. He sends his wife into Gawain's bedroom for the sole purpose of tempting him. And, in the end, he even fakes two killing blows. For better or worse, the Green Knight is a great deceiver.

Trickery and deceit are both treated as implicitly destructive according to the norms of chivalry,. According to 11th century writer Ramon Llull, who wrote a book on chivalry that may have inspired the Pearl Poet, these destroy chivalry. "Showing favour to... truth... honesty... and other things similar to these pertain to the knight, for just as all nobility shall be recognized in God, so all that for which Chivalry receives honour on the part of those who are in its Order shall be compared to the knight" (Fallows 78). Llull rules that honesty should be held to a knight just as nobility is held to God. To be dishonest is to not be a knight. Bertilak, then, is not a knight by standard definition. As

we have covered, however, Bertilak is someone who looks at intent over action. His intent is not to toy with Gawain, nor is it to glean some cruel satisfaction. He wants to test Gawain, try him, judge his honor and share a grand feast at the end of it. Though Gawain declines this grand feast, he does not decline his offer of friendship. The Green Knight agrees with the notion of unchivalrous means to a good end, and in this way, he is honorable by his own standards alone.

Gawain, though he thanks Bertilak for his kindness with embraces and good wishes after his trial the Green Chapel, refuses to accompany the Green Knight any further. This is not elaborated on in the text, but Gawain could have been understandably overwhelmed by all this deceit, which he would most likely see as bad. When speaking with the Round Table, he describes Bertilak only as “cheerful,” rather than “honorable” or “good.” Perhaps this is due to some ill feeling sitting in Gawain’s stomach about it, but this enters the realm of conjecture.

All this deceit and much more happens on the part of Bertilak throughout the course of the story, all for the sake of sustaining the game Gawain is playing. From the very beginning of the story, Gawain believes he knows what he’s getting into. The Green Knight goes over the terms of the game with him multiple times, but he deceives Gawain by selectively offering information. Before the game begins, the Green Knight clarifies some rules and conditions. One of these he states as follows: “ȝif I þe tell trwly quen I þe tape haue / And þou me smopely hatz smyten, smarty I þe teche / Of my hous and my home and myn owen nome, / þen may þou frayst my fare and forwardez holde”

(406-410).⁵ A reader who already knows this story would know that the Green Knight is not telling the full story. When the time comes to reveal his name, he states that he is the Green Knight, known far and wide from his home, the Green Chapel. While this is true, the persona of the Green Knight is a magical illusion cast by Morgan le Fay. The man who speaks is also Bertilak, the lord of a fortress in a thickly forested wood. Choosing to withhold this information is the Green Knight's first move in a game of deception that is played by Gawain.

King Arthur himself comments on the idea of trickery and deceit, stating that it's in tune with the Christmas spirit. He says to Guinevere, and thus to the reader: "Dere dame, today demay yow neuer. / Wel bycommes such craft vpun Christmasse--- / Laykyng of enterludez, to laze and to syng--- / Among þise kynde caroles of kny3tez and ladyez"⁶ (470-473). During this speech, Arthur's outward appearance is not shocked, but instead very calm. This sort of play with reality was something that King Arthur was most likely used to around Christmastime. According to scholar Maria Sachiko Cecire, "in the Middle Ages performing bands of mummers would... enter homes and courts in the winter disguised as wild men or monstrous beings to offer a play, game, or challenge to the gathered inhabitants" (137). This tradition is exactly what Bertilak has followed. Perhaps Gawain, as the "weakest and least experienced" knight, to use his own words, could be viewed as naive for not expecting the persona of

⁵ If you deftly and duly deal me the stroke, / I will tell you in truth, once I've taken the blow; / Of my house and my homeland you'll hear, and my name. You may come there to keep our true covenant then.

⁶ Dear lady, do not be dismayed by all this: / For such cunning becomes the Christmastime well, / As do masks, festive mirth, music and such / Interluding light carols of ladies and knights.

the Green Knight to be a disguise in itself, just as performers would disguise themselves for holiday revels around the same time.

Almost a year after the Green Knight and Gawain first meet, they meet again in Bertilak's castle, Gawain none the wiser. In order to create this magic circle for observation and judgment, Bertilak knows that Gawain must not yet find out that he is the Green Knight. He feigns having never met Gawain, and politely inquires about what brought him there. "Quat derue dede had hym dryuen at þat dere tyme / So kenly fro þe kynges kourt to kayre al his one, / Er þe halidayez holly were halet out of toun" (1046-1049).⁷ He pretends ignorance in order to immerse Sir Gawain in the game. If Gawain knew that he was a part of a judgment game, it is possible that he would not act authentically. Bertilak deceives him in order to create an immersive simulation in which to judge him based on authentic results.

Gawain knows he has agreed to something, he knows he is part of a game, but he knows not to what extent he is participating. Bertilak's wife is a perfect antithesis to this ignorance: she knows everything about Gawain's situation. The beheading game, the exchanges game, and the judgment at the Green Chapel are all hinging on his performance with her. During their interactions, Gawain ends up accepting a very uncharacteristic gift.

Sir Gawain, who holds himself as a good and honest knight, is expected to follow the rules of any games he is presented with and accepts. This is because to do otherwise would be to practice dishonesty. Ramon Llull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry*

⁷ [Bertilak asked] What great quest from his court had thus called him away, / What had caused him to quit his own king, all to ride / On the highest of holidays halls could observe.

puts it this way: “A knight... has loyalty, and is the servant of truth” (71). To cheat would be disloyal to a knight’s promises and not serving of the “truth” of the game’s rules. But Gawain waivers on these principles because of fear for his life. When Bertilak’s wife offers Gawain what she claims to be a life-saving garment, he falls victim to temptation and accepts it. Furthermore, he hides the truth from Bertilak about having received this blessed article from his wife. Indeed, Gawain only does so for fear of his own beheading at the Green Chapel. His fear of death is so great, that he drones on his his sleep:

“In dreȝ droupyng of dreme draueled þat noble,
 As mon þat watz in mornyng of mony þro þoȝtes,
 How þat Destine schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde
 At þe Grene Chapel when he þe home metes
 And byhoues his buffet abide withoute debate more”⁸ (1750-1754).

Before his execution, his thoughts are consumed only with this fear. He is entangled in a game himself; one he does not know the scope, shape, or rules of. He does not yet know that his death is not guaranteed, but rather is a possible outcome of an overarching game of judgment and consequence.

So, Gawain takes the girdle as a gift and keeps it, breaking the rules of the exchanges game. However, Gawain does not fall for the offer of romantic favors or the words of the beautiful and elegant woman. Instead, his weakness is exposed by the prospect of miraculously living through a beheading. Bertilak’s wife says of a girdle she offers: “For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace, / While he hit hade hemely

⁸ In the deepest of dreams, Gawain drowsily spoke--- / As a man who’s in mourning, with many sad thoughts--- / Of the day that his destiny deigned that he must / At the Green Chapel greet the fierce Green Knight and take / A heavy blow from his hand; he was held to it, pledged!

halched aboute, / þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt, / For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe”⁹ (1851-1854). Gawain finds the idea of avoiding death while still playing the game alluring. “When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech, / Myȝt he haf slypped to be vynslayn þe sleȝt were noble”¹⁰ (1857-1858). He accepts the fair lady’s gift in order to survive, but he does not offer it to Bertilak as he should have as part of the exchanges game.

This breaking of rules, this deceit, is a point of shame for Gawain later. He wears the girdle around his arm as a reminder of his dishonesty and failure. It is worth noting that Gawain is the only one in the game who applies deceit and subsequently feels shame. Bertilak does nothing but deceive, from the moment he is introduced in an illusory form, to the very end, where he feigns a blow of his axe. He never feels remorse, because he is in a position of power-- it’s all part of a test that Bertilak has set forth. Gawain, in contrast, does feel intense shame for the one time he cheated. Though Bertilak forgives him, he does not forgive himself. That is because, as I have alluded to, Gawain was not in a position of power to deceive for the sake of the game. Only Bertilak was.

Though Bertilak was certainly the figure of authority in their game, the question still remains: is Gawain really playing the game Bertilak has set out? How can one play a game they do not fully know the rules to? Since Gawain is not aware of the rules he is being judged by, and everyone around him manipulates him, one could venture to say

⁹ If girdled, if graced with this green sash’s length, / While it’s tightly attached to his torso, a man / Can’t be hewn under heaven by heroes, though fierce; / No, he cannot be killed, not by cunning on earth.

¹⁰ Could he value his vow and survive nonetheless, Take his thrust and yet thrive, it would thoroughly please!

that he is not a player. On the contrary, he is being played. Bertilak and his wife manipulate Gawain with favor, romance, deceit, and the withholding of information.

Surrounded by deceit and illusions, Gawain is not a participant in the greater game at hand. How could he be? He does not know the rules, he does not know on what he is being judged or by whom, he does not know how to win, and he does not even know who's playing. Indeed, Gawain seems only to be a pawn. Gawain does not know enough about the game to be considered a player. But at the same time, one cannot deny on the surface level that Gawain is playing a game of some sort. Perhaps it is a game that only exists within his own mind, placed there by Bertilak and his wife. But if Gawain was never playing a game, then why does he follow rules? In this way, self-contradiction rears its head once more. Gawain is both playing the Green Knight's game, and not playing it. It is not just that Gawain is playing a different game than the Green Knight-- he is playing a version of the game that the two agreed upon.

At this point, the way that self-contradiction plays into both *Sir Gawain* and the concept of games in general, and how these things overlap, should start to become clearer. The overarching narrative is that, despite the way that the world works, and despite the way in which chivalry works, ideas in themselves can be admirable based on intent. Though the Green Knight breaks chivalric codes by being dishonest with Gawain, his ultimate goal is honorable and thus he is admirable. Though Gawain cheats at the exchanges game, his life is spared because he was not ill-intended. The root of self-contradiction is to be two conflicting things at once. In the largest case of this poem,

Bertilak and Gawain are both knights and (according to Lull's definition) not-knights at some point.

Now, to delve more deeply into Bertilak / the Green Knight as a self-contradictory figure. He is described as forgiving and honorable, but there is no doubt that there are contradictions in his character. From the moment he appears, the Green Knight is a friendly-yet-imposing figure; Cecire points out that the Green Knight arrives with a holly branch in one hand and an axe in the other. "Carrying a branch implies peace: the holly works like a cheery holiday version of an olive branch. But in his other hand the Green Knight holds a ferocious-looking axe, a warning of the danger that he will soon pose to the court" (Cecire 138). In her analysis, Cecire touches upon the self-contradictory nature of the Green Knight himself from the very moment he arrives.

Out of all the self-contradictions that have been thus far discussed, I have saved the simple one of Bertilak, the Green Knight, for last. This is because I believe it most usefully and keenly mirrors the idea of the game as both a serious and a playful endeavor. As the arbiter of the beheading game and the exchanges game, Bertilak represents the contradictory nature of games themselves. Games are both a playful and a serious thing, just as the Green Knight is a peaceful and a menacing figure.

The seriousness of the beheading game is all too obvious: Gawain's life is at stake. While it remains unknown to him, Gawain is being judged by his actions at all times within Bertilak's estate, and cheating or failing at the game could and would mean death by the cleave of the Green Knight's axe. The game is also a playful endeavor, however, with Bertilak in particular regarding it as fun or pleasurable. After everything is

over, Bertilak invites Gawain back to his castle for festivities. “And 3e schal in þis Nwe 3er a3ayn to my wonez / And we schyn reuel þe remnaunt of þis ryche fest / Ful bene”¹¹ (SGGK 2400-2402). While Gawain declines this offer as previously mentioned, he returns home to festivities thrown by King Arthur’s court. Even when Gawain wants to avoid the playful side of things, he is dragged into it, since a game is meant to be a joyous and festive thing.

In looking at the Green Knight as both deathly serious and joyously festive, just like the games that he presents, we can view him as a complicated character motivated by more than just a mission to carry out a test. He wants to have fun, and he wants to be serious. He wants to play a game where Gawain’s life is at stake, and he wants to become friends with Gawain as well. Bertilak the Green Knight, like the games he so likes to play, is multifaceted and self-contradictory within himself.

While the Green Knight’s self-contradictory personality may be obvious at this point in my analysis, I would like to draw attention as to how closely parallel that self-contradiction runs to the very games the Green Knight himself presents. Serious-yet-playful is a theme of the games in the text, as I have mentioned, and perhaps indicative of the way games can be in real life. Anything from the Olympics to competitive eSports can be seen as playful-yet-serious. And this is not an honor reserved for elitely performed games. A child’s game of “cops and robbers” can be just as serious to the right people. Namely, the people who are playing the game in order to improve and grow.

¹¹ Let’s renew our New Year’s delights; / We will feast, my friend, and be festive with pomp / and show.

The chapter thus far has discussed mostly self-contradiction. But just as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is full of contradictions, it is also full of illusions and falsity. I have analyzed general deceit and dishonesty already, but I would like to draw attention to the idea of falseness. Falseness, perhaps referring to a dishonest fault in one's character, can be seen in Gawain's below self-assessment: "Now I am fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer / Of trecherye and vntrawpe--- boph bityde sorze / And care!"¹² (2382-2384). Gawain states that he is faulty and false, describing himself as dishonest to a fault. But Gawain has only become so through accepting and keeping the girdle, which was against the rules of the exchanges game, which was a game within the beheading game, which was part of an overarching test of character. Gawain has become false because he does not know where he himself is.

The world that Gawain experiences throughout the story is a made-up one, steeped in illusion. Starting with the beheading of the Green Knight, which was a false death, continuing and becoming more complex as the plot progresses, and finally ending with Gawain's disillusionment at the Green Chapel. The illusion, of course, does not end for the reader; they are immersing themselves in a fictional place, just as Gawain in the legend did. Through all that falseness, one would assume that Gawain would have learned nothing. What, after all, can be learned from illusory situations?

Within the world of the story, Bertilak creates a false world to live in: his own estate. Gawain stumbles upon the castle, which would soon be the setting for the deceitful game of exchanges. To this game, there is more than meets the eye-- there

¹² Now I am faulty and false, and afraid as I've ever been of treachery and dishonesty. May illness and sorrow follow these!

are two things Gawain doesn't know. First, his life is at stake depending on his performance. Second, the whole castle is in on this attempt at his life. Bertilak, his wife, and the old woman (Morgan le Fay) all conspire to create an illusory scenario within the castle grounds. The falseness of this environment, that which separates it from Gawain's real world, is reflected in descriptions of Gawain's journey to the castle and the castle itself. The poet spends over 60 lines describing these things as what can be viewed as self-contradictory.

First, Gawain must ride through "a forest ful dep, þat ferly was wylde"¹³ (741). The text goes on to describe the forest as having hundreds of trees arranged in a labyrinthine fashion. The author also writes that "þe hazel and þe hazþorne were harled al samen"¹⁴ (743). Two different plants twist together to create something new and real. Their union creates a duality that makes them indistinguishable from one another, in a wood that Gawain cannot easily make sense of. The poet ends the description of the forest by mentioning that there must have been two miles or more of dense wood. This serves to place Bertilak's false setting far apart from what Gawain already knows.

The poet's description of the castle creates even more divisions and separations between what Gawain knows and what he is about to enter. The poem takes care to mention "þe depe double ditch þat drof to þe place"¹⁵ (786), as well as "syþen gartyez ful gaye gered bitwene"¹⁶ (791). Both of these details can serve to separate even further Bertilak's estate from the real world.

¹³ A wide stretch of wood, both wild and dark.

¹⁴ There, the hazel and hawthorn are twisted together into one.

¹⁵ The deep double-ditch that defended the place.

¹⁶ Great towers and turrets teeming above.

Perhaps the most telling description of all of Bertilak's illusory-yet-real estate is the following: "pared out of papure purely hit seemed"¹⁷ (802). The poem spends a lot of time describing a grand and fine castle, with unbelievably deep moats and unimaginably tall towers, only to have the very last line devoted to the castle's aesthetic run contrary to all previous imagery. The castle is grand, impressive, and hidden behind miles of untamed wood. It is seemingly invulnerable to siege as well as cold. And yet, somehow, it gives off the air of being made of paper; a false castle, a flimsy ruse.

As Gawain enters this ruse, he enters a *magic circle*, a false or imaginary world that Bertilak crafts to test Gawain. Everything within the forest, including the castle, is the medieval equivalent of a simulation, carefully put together by humans and for a human. Thinking about this simulation, it would serve to realize that *Gawain and the Green Knight* itself is a work of literature, a fictional story-- a mental simulation, created by a human for humans. Bertilak's estate in its hospitable form is an illusion, crafted to house the exchange game. The exchange game is deceitful, as it was secretly crafted to be apart of the beheading game. The beheading game is deceitful in that it was only crafted as part of a larger scheme to test Gawain's character. And a story is an illusion, a bundle of lines stained onto a page, crafted by an author to be read by an audience. Bertilak's estate is, effectively, an illusion wrapped in countless illusions.

As I have attempted to prove, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains themes of self-contradiction and illusory deception. From Gawain both winning and losing the beheading game, to the Green Knight having contradictory identities, to Bertilak's estate

¹⁷ It seemed that the castle was cut out of cardboard or paper.

being surrounded by and made of contradictions, the themes always show through.

These go hand-in-hand with the idea of games as both serious and playful, friendly and competitive, or trivial and important. When looking at these themes in relation to games, it is undeniable that such a feat would have been possible without games as the “central nucleus” of the poem, to borrow the words of scholar John Leyerle (50).

Again, it can be seen that this all connects back to the idea of intent versus action. The actions of Bertilak and Gawain may be unchivalrous at some points, but they remain knights. They possess the intent and integrity to remain knights through their errors, because their errors were rooted in good. My next chapter will discuss the concept of knighthood more closely, asking the question of what it means for Gawain, Bertilak, or anyone to be a perfect knight. This will serve to draw even more parallels between Chivalric codes, admirable ideals, and the complexity of the concept of knighthood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Chapter 2 - The Perfect Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, as I have striven to prove, is a poem that is preoccupied with games and play. Adhering to the rules of games, as we have seen, is regarded as honorable and correct. After all, Sir Gawain's entire journey hinges on following the rules of the beheading game. And when Gawain breaks the rules in the exchanges game, though his reasonable intentions are acknowledged, he is punished by a nick on the back of his neck by the Green Knight's axe.

In the same way, I will argue in this chapter that the poem is occupied with knighthood as a parallel to games. What does it mean to be the perfect knight? What rules have to be followed? Can one still be considered a good knight after breaking the rules? This chapter is interested in exploring perfect knighthood while drawing parallels to games, and what it means to be an admirable player of games. Exploration down this path will lead us to assess the validity of man-made rules and self-regulated conduct: who makes these? Who judges them? What are the consequences of acknowledging them or not doing so? And finally, we will explore the elusive concept of "intent," which I introduced in Chapter One. If one acts in a game, or in knighthood, with reasonable and admirable intent, but the result is still bad, is that worthy of praise? Can the perfect knight make a mistake if the mind or heart is in the right place? Going forward, this chapter will attempt to touch upon all of these questions by comparing the play of a game to the practice of knighthood.

Most importantly, touching upon these questions will bring the text naturally to a peculiar claim that I would like to make in this chapter: that a good player of games possesses the same traits as a good knight. Since, it will be asserted, the ideals of the player of games and the knight are in many ways the same, then one with the proper attitude to strive towards being the perfect knight is also necessarily a good player of games. This claim may be a reason all its own that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* must be viewed through a lens of game and play.

The most vital and obvious thing that Bertilak / the Green Knight and Gawain have in common is that they are both knights. Sir Gawain is a knight who was chosen to serve King Arthur. As such, Gawain prides himself on being righteous and chivalrous. The Green Knight is undoubtedly a knight in the performative sense: Arthur identifies him as one before anything is known about the man aside from the way he presents himself. Arthur describes him immediately as a “cortays knyȝt”¹⁸ (275). He comes mounted on a great horse, with resplendent green armor and a terrifying axe. Though Arthur only describes him as a fine knight, Bertilak can also be viewed as “good” knight, in the sense that he is also a connoisseur of chivalry and proper conduct. He, like Gawain, is interested in rules, honesty, and consequences. This is most apparent when he holds Gawain to the rules of the beheading game and evaluates him based both on honor and the intent behind Gawain’s actions.

However, a “good knight” is not a cut-and-dry thing; what makes a perfect knight can be debated. Can one be a perfect knight? What does it mean to strive towards

¹⁸ Fine knight.

knightly perfection? Knighthood is actually closer to games than one might think. It is this work's assertion that perfect knighthood can be understood better through a comparison to games. There are four points, outlined below, that serve to help make this comparison. First, the conduct of games and knighthood are both dictated by arbitrary rules, decided upon by people. Next, the rules of games and knighthood must both be agreed to and accepted by all participants. Then, there is the fact that games and knighthood are both performative, in the sense that the actions present in both are usually on display in front of an audience. And finally, both have participants who strive to be greater than they are, or even the greatest there is, at their given tasks. The next portion of this chapter will devote itself to exploring each of these similarities in terms of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Like a game, knighthood has arbitrary rules, created by humans. Just as in a game, Gawain is expected to act and move in a specific way in the presence of his king (Arthur). Before standing, for instance, Gawain asks permission: "Bid me boȝe fro þis benche and stondee by yow þere, / þat I wythoute vylanye myȝt voyde þis table"¹⁹ (344-345). There is nothing, aside from manmade rules, to stop the knight from moving or behaving without Arthur's permission. Just as in chess, there is nothing physical to stop the rook from moving diagonally-- except for some man-created rule that it can't. There is a way in which every piece-- including the *knight*-- is meant to move. Every piece fulfills its role, and the knight is no exception.

¹⁹ [grant me] the right now to rise from this Round Table here, / And permit me to move, make my way to your side.

Scholarship on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has not overlooked the connection between chess and Gawain's conduct. Dr. Thomas Rendall of Peking University writes a paper entirely devoted to the game of chess as represented in *Sir Gawain*. "The game of chess provided the poet with a strikingly appropriate metaphor for the story's central actions" (Peking 197). While it is true that Gawain moves according to the rules of the knight, like in chess, I would argue that this metaphor can be taken even farther. As I have begun to point out, Gawain's journey and the entire poem in general can be connected to the greater concept of games which chess is a part of.

One could argue that Bertilak is savvy to this connection between games and knighthood, which is why he tests Gawain's honor as a knight using the beheading game and the exchanges game. This idea that Bertilak understands the comparisons between games and knighthood would explain why, after participating in multiple games, Sir Gawain is judged as a knight rather than a player of games. There is a certain honor found in following rules, though one does not have to. This exact honor is the kind of knightly trait that Bertilak is looking for in Gawain in the first place: the opposite of the cowardice he detests. In order to get him to participate in the game, Bertilak threatens Gawain with only one thing: "þerfore com, oþer recreaunt be calde þe behoues"²⁰ (456). He tells Gawain it would be cowardly not to follow through on playing the game, and thus Gawain agrees without faltering.

²⁰ Therefore come, or be called a most recreant knight!

Gawain's agreement to play the game is not a rule that anyone sets for him. He decides it himself. That is why, aside from games having rules, they also require agreement. As stated in the previous chapter, one cannot be a participant in a game unless one agrees to the rules. One can be a piece or a pawn in a game without knowing the rules, but one cannot be a full participant. In the same way, a knight must traditionally take an oath, swearing to follow the path of knighthood: agreement is a necessary element of the role. This is why, instead of forcing a challenge upon Gawain, the Green Knight instead offers one. Sir Gawain's agreement-- even insistence-- to participate is integral to the concept of knighthood. And Gawain's ability to follow through with this agreement is just as important. To play a game, one must agree to its rules and follow through with it. Just as Gawain agreed to being a knight, and follows through with that as best he can. It can also be argued that Bertilak understands this important comparison as well. Just like knighthood, no game that Gawain plays under the Green Knight's eye is forced. Gawain is the one who agrees to all of it. And the Green Knight offers no real consequences for if he chooses not to follow through, only the title of cowardice. But the threat of such a public brand is inducement enough for Gawain, who strives towards perfect knighthood.

Indeed, in addition to rules and the agreement to follow those rules, knighthood and games have another integral thing in common: as they are arbitrarily designed by humans, they are also judged by humans. This means, importantly, that they are *performative*. Knighthood and games are both, at least partially, meant to be viewed or acknowledged by others. Spectators are often present in both knighthood and games:

as a knight, one cares for nothing more than the approval of the King, damsel, or whoever they may be fighting for, as well as the approval of one's fellow knights. Gawain, for instance, shows extreme respect to King Arthur, and demonstrates a deep respect for his knightly peers. Gawain compliments them, remarking that "Ne better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered"²¹ (352). As a player of games, one usually seeks a reaction from others. This can be accomplished by acknowledging them as one would like to be acknowledged. Spectators, as the knights of the Round Table are in this story, are a large part of games for the very sake of enforcing performativity. Even without spectators, one playing a game demands the acknowledgement of everyone else playing the game along with them. A game well played is, at all times, something to be acknowledged. Considering the man-made nature of both of these things, it should come as no surprise that a large point of them both is to be observed and judged by man. No game is without observers, and no knight is without someone to serve or something to prove.

There are certainly situations in which very few people are observing one's participation in a game, but this does not remove the element of performativity. For instance, when Gawain accepts the girdle from Bertilak's wife and chooses not to share it with Bertilak, breaking the rules of the game, he believes that no one in relation to the exchanges game is observing him. However, this is not the case: not only is Bertilak's wife watching, as importantly Gawain is observing *himself*. Gawain's conscience is

²¹ No better bodies have been lifted to see battle.

liable to weigh on him and ruin the game (and in this case his own sense of good knighthood), just as a game of solitaire would be ruined by cheating.

Finally, knighthood and games are both things that individuals can strive to be better at. There are great knights, such as Lancelot and Gawain, who are hailed by all as great knights. Arthur and the Green Knight both declare their respect for Sir Gawain, as do many others. Gawain is called a fine man and a great knight, and still he strives to improve. Gawain sees a place he could have performed better, such as his conduct with Bertilak's wife in taking the girdle, and becomes bent on constantly reminding himself of that mistake: "In syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte"²² (2432). Gawain reminds himself of mistakes to improve himself, even though the people around him approve of him already (The Green Knight / Bertilak calls him "On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede".²³) Just as in games, one can be a great player while still striving to be better. The greatest player of any sport, for instance, will always strive to become better than they are. After all, one does not become a great knight or a great player of games by not striving to improve by default. And in this way, those who constantly attempt to better themselves when they can are good candidates as both knights and players of games.

Another aspect of personal improvement through striving to be greater is competition. The competitive nature of many games is obvious, from sports to board games and video games. But there is also a competitive aspect to knighthood. One of the first things Gawain states at the beginning of the story, when he meets the Green Knight, is that he wants to stand on equal footing with his fellow knights. He wants to

²² It shall serve as a sign of my fault.

²³ The most faultless of princes to ever walk on foot.

earn his place alongside them, which is another way to say that he wants to viably compete for greatness among them. Gawain says among his fellow knights, “I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest... / No bounte but your blod I in my bode knowe... / I haue franed hit at yor fyrst, foldez hit to me”²⁴ (349-357). Gawain states himself the weakest, and then asks to be the one to accept the Green Knight’s challenge. In the competitive spirit of a player of games, Sir Gawain takes this challenge to hope to show himself to be strong in comparison to his fellow knights. Competition, as seen in games and knighthood, serves as an agent of and motivator for self-improvement.

It is interesting, then, that from these four comparisons, we can begin to garner an idea at what knighthood, and eventually *perfect* knighthood, is. To recap, the comparisons we have made between games and knighthood are as follows: First, they have rules, decided on by people. Second, they must be understood and agreed to by participants. Third, they are inherently performative. And fourth, one can always strive to be better than they are. To live by these four qualities perfectly is one of many answers to what perfect knighthood might be. To perfectly follow the rules of knighthood-- from etiquette to the commands of one’s king-- contributes to the making of a perfect knight. To acknowledge and follow through with everything that comes with the territory of being a knight also contributes. To perfectly perform the social role of a knight also lends itself to being a perfect knight. And finally, to strive to be ever better in one’s roles, mentioned up to here, contributes to the making of the perfect knight. Is it possible to exude perfect rule-following, agree to everything without question, present oneself

²⁴ I’m the weakest, least worthy in this wide hall today; / What my lineage left me is al that I claim. / I request that this task be transferred to me.

perfectly at all times, and constantly strive to better oneself without rest at all times?

There certainly has not been an example to date.

Gawain himself, though Bertilak calls him “On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote þede”²⁵, is not perfect. He may well be the closest to perfect that Bertilak has ever observed, however. He only waivers during any of Bertilak’s games in that he cheats once, accepting a gift and not giving it to Lord Bertilak in accordance with the game’s rules. Gawain broke form because his life was threatened and he believed breaking a rule would save it.

But Gawain also shies away from this model of perfect knighthood when he trembles and cowers at having his head cleaved off by the Green Knight’s axe. This is not keeping up appearances in accordance with how a knight is meant to act: dignified and fearless. The Green Knight even berates Gawain for straying from knighthood in this way, making him to regain his composure in a return to form. “And now þou flees for ferde er þou fele harmez!”²⁶ (2272). While one might find it ridiculous that Gawain would be faulted for being afraid to die, the point stands that he is straying from the performative nature of knightliness. The Green Knight does not fault Gawain for being afraid. He faults Gawain for *acting* afraid.

The difference between being afraid and *acting* afraid comes back to the performative nature of perfect knighthood and the game. No one makes the claim that knights should be truly fearless, just as no one makes the claim that a good player of games must always think with sportsmanship and humility. Performatively acting these

²⁵ The most faultless of princes to ever walk on foot.

²⁶ For you cringe, before cut, like a coward or worse!

things out, however, is a must to keep one's reputation intact. Gawain can be afraid of dying, but he cannot perform that fear. In the same way, anyone who plays games can feel sour about a loss, but it would be humiliating to act out poor sportsmanship in the face of those feelings.

Performativity, in fact, is closely related to the next thing this chapter hopes to discuss: intent. As mentioned in multiple places previously, Gawain is forgiven for cheating at the exchanges game because of the understandable intention behind cheating – to save his own life. Gawain unarguably breaks rules, just as a knight and player of games should not. But he is forgiven because his intent was reasonable. Is it possible to be a perfect knight, or a perfect player of games, even while making mistakes and breaking rules if one's intent is pure? Though Bertilak is the one who forgives, it can be reasoned that even he would still argue “no.”

When the Green Knight swings down his axe, judging Gawain for his actions, he does not cut off his head. This acknowledgement of Gawain's intent saves him from death. Gawain's life is essentially granted back to him as a reward for performing with admirable intent throughout all games. “Bot for þe lufed your lyf-- þe lesse I yow blame” (2368). In addition to this reward, however, there is punishment. A bleeding nick is produced by the Green Knight on the back of Gawain's neck, a mark of imperfection. Gawain, minutes later, proceeds to place the girdle around his arm as a self-inflicted proof of imperfection.

Even though Gawain is nicked and faulted, he is still referred to by his judge as the “most faultless.” This would initially lead one to believe that Bertilak is calling

Gawain a perfect knight, a perfect player of games, or a perfect man. But this phrase can easily be interpreted to mean exactly the opposite. Bertilak does not call Gawain a perfect knight, or anything along those lines. He refers to Gawain as the most faultless to “ever walk on foot.” In this way, the “most perfect” is actually less than “perfect.” Because, as is evident from the mark of judgement on Gawain’s neck and the self-placed girdle around his arm, he is not. What Bertilak asserts with this statement, that Gawain is the *most* faultless to walk on foot, is that no human is perfect. Even Sir Gawain, who completed every trial with the grace of a knight and a player of games, had faults. While Gawain may be the “most faultless” knight that Bertilak has ever seen, it does not mean that he is immaculately perfect.

Just as the Green Knight says: “As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more, / So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝtez”²⁷ (2363-2364). Gawain, the pearl in the metaphor of peas, is perfect and priceless compared to his peers. While a pearl is precious, it is not priceless compared to a diamond. Gawain, in his pursuit to be the perfect knight and the perfect player of games, is constantly flying higher to become this elusive diamond. The dialogue proves Bertilak’s line of thinking: not that Gawain was perfect, but that he was as close to perfect as any human can get. Knightly perfection, though impossible, can be strived towards. In the same way, no player of any game can truly be “the best” by all statistics. One can only attempt to better oneself and come as close to perfection as possible, never truly reaching it.

²⁷ As pearls are more precious than peas, when compared, / So much greater is Gawain, I glean, than all knights!

Bertilak is not the only character who would agree with this notion: Sir Gawain himself would agree as well. If the mark on Gawain's neck is proof that Bertilak thinks him imperfect, then the girdle around his own arm would be proof that Gawain thinks himself imperfect as well. Gawain places the girdle around his arm, as previously mentioned, to serve as a reminder that he is imperfect. The goal of the girdle, just as the goal of the nick, is not to incite knightly perfection, but to encourage acknowledgements of one's own faults and inspire self-improvement towards that elusive end.

It can be argued, then, that even though Gawain is not the perfect knight or the perfect player of games, he can be described as the most perfect knight and the most perfect player of games. That is, one who always strives for self-improvement in place of settling for what one is at the time. The Green Knight's game, it can be argued, was offered to show Gawain that he was both the most perfect knight, and a knight that would never reach perfection. No one can.

The reason Gawain kept his head is because he was the very best he could be, in Bertilak's eyes. Not "faultless," but "the most faultless" that anyone could be. Though there is a conceivable world in which Gawain refused to accept the girdle, and continued to act strong in the face of death, there is not a world in which a knight, or a player of games, is perfect all the time. Both people and rules are too variable for there not to be a mistake. If the rule of a knight is to be ever-vigilant, for instance, then is there no room for sleep?

That is why the concept of intent is salient. A question arises now that has not been touched upon yet: *who* makes rules for knights and players of games, and *why*? It

is the intent of these rules that matters. Bertilak, for instance, uses the exchanges game and his wife's plan to assess Gawain's honesty. A large point of the game was to gauge that. Though Gawain failed at the test and the game by cheating, his honesty and reputable character was still hailed. This is because, though Gawain broke a rule, he did nothing that was unreasonably against the spirit of the assessment. To *understandably* break a rule of a game or deviate from knightly perfection is to keep one's good name intact. That is where, in the life of an ever-vigilant knight, there is room for sleep: when there is understandable intent.

Just as the sleeping knight is not disgraced, Gawain was not disgraced in failing to turn over the girdle to Bertilak when prompted. As the Green Knight states, and as is cited earlier, this is because Gawain's desire to keep his life was understandable. Gawain does it because he is attempting to protect his own life in the greater scheme of things. Though it went against the rules of the exchanges game, it still sees Gawain keep his honor as an admirable knight and player of games.

The other time that Gawain breaks form is when he fails at the performative aspect of knighthood and shows fear for his life. Visible fear for one's life in the face of death, while understandable, was still corrected by Bertilak, who refused to continue until Gawain was properly poised. This is because, as has been covered multiple times, the Green Knight is concerned with *intent*. Though cowering under the guillotine is understandable, its intent is not. Instead of showing dignity to the Green Knight, Gawain was showing a helpless and defeated side of himself. The Green Knight, as a result, makes Gawain reevaluate the intent behind his display of emotion and correct it, going

so far as to accuse Gawain of not being himself. “‘pou art not Gawayn,’ quoth þe gome, ‘þat is so goud halden’”²⁸ (2270). Upon hearing this Gawain’s intent as a knight to show dignity begins to align with his actions. “Quop Gawayn, ‘I schunt onez / And so wyl I not more’”²⁹ (2268-2269). Only after this steeling of nerves is Bertilak finally satisfied to proceed.

A comparison, then, can easily be made between what it means to be a good player of games and what it means to be a good knight. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, at its core, is a story about knighthood, games, and the playing of games. The rule-following, agreement-making, performative, and self-bettering aspects of games and knighthood are traits that both Gawain and Bertilak either strive for or acknowledge as admirable and knightly. When one cannot achieve true perfection in either games or knighthood, what is to be done besides embody the facets of perfection as well as possible? While it is impossible for Gawain to be a perfect knight, he can be the *most* perfect knight among humans. This is accomplished by seeking the ideals of a good player of games. Knighthood, in that way, is a game to be played and mastered. But never truly so-- there is always room for improvement.

In all of these ways, the ideal traits of the perfect knight line up with the ideal traits of a perfect player of games. Knighthood in itself, then, is a form of game. Though the players of games in Arthurian legend are larger-than-life mythological figures, they are still players of games, just like so many modern people. To be a good knight is to be a good player of games.

²⁸ You are not Gawain, whose good fame has gone through the land.

²⁹ I shuddered at your first stroke, and I will not do so again.

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